

"A true story that grew out of a series of articles Suskind wrote for the *Wall Street Journal* in 1994. The series won a Pulitzer Prize for feature reporting. It's a gripping read, but the book is even better." —*San Diego Union-Tribune*

"Every person in America should read this book." —*Whole Life Times*

"[An] inspirational story . . . a remarkably intimate work. . . . Like the celebrated [Pulitzer Prize-winning] series that is its foundation, *Hope* is based on extensive interviews, astounding access, and acute reporting. The minutiae of Cedric's personal history come alive in carefully observed scenes."

—*Philadelphia Inquirer*

"A dramatic, heartrending story bound to enrapture reviewers, grab educated readers, and provoke much discussion. . . . The reader can't help being moved by Suskind's novelistic account of the tension between Cedric's two worlds."

—*Biography* magazine

"The story is true, although it reads like a gripping novel." —*Newsday*

"An enormously hopeful book, a book that cries out to be heard."

—*Houston Chronicle*

"Suskind uses his reporter's skills brilliantly, portraying Cedric's outer and inner life and making an eloquent though unstated plea for affirmative action. Essential reading that provides some small hope for our social ills." —*Library Journal*

"This book is both engrossing and illuminating. The narrative reads a lot like fiction. But it's not." —*San Mateo County Times*

RON SUSKIND

# A HOPE in the UNSEEN



An American Odyssey from  
the Inner City to the Ivy League

BROADWAY BOOKS

New York

## SOMETHING to PUSH AGAINST

A hip-hop tune bursts forth from the six-foot-high amplifiers, prompting the shoulder-snug slopes of black teenagers to sway and pivot in their bleacher seats. It takes only a second or two for some eight hundred students to lock onto the backbeat, and the gymnasium starts to thump with a jaunty enthusiasm.

Principal Richard Washington, an aggressive little gamecock of a man, struts across the free throw line to a stand-up microphone at the top of the key as the tune (just a check for the speaker system) cuts off. He dramatically clears his throat and sweeps his gaze across the students who happen to be present today—a chilly February morning in 1994—at Frank W. Ballou Senior High, the most troubled and violent school in the blighted southeast corner of Washington, D.C. Usually, he uses assemblies as a forum to admonish students for their stupidity or disrespect. Today, though, he smiles brightly.

“Ballou students,” he says after a moment, “let’s give a warm welcome to Mayor Marion Barry.”

The mayor steps forward from a too-small cafeteria chair in his dark suit, an intricately embroidered kufi covering his bald spot. He grabs the throat of the mike stand. “Yes,” he says, his voice full of pride, “I like what I see,” a comment that draws a roar of appreciation. The mayor’s criminal past—his much publicized conviction for cocaine possession and subsequent time served—binds him to this audience, where almost everyone can claim a friend, relative, or parent who is currently in “the system.”

The mayor delivers his standard speech about self-esteem, about "being all you believe you can be" and "please, everyone, stay in school." As he speaks, Barry surveys an all-black world: a fully formed, parallel universe to white America. Providing today's music are disc jockeys from WPGC, a hip-hop station from just across the D.C. line in Maryland's black suburbs. A nationally famous black rhythm and blues singer—Tevin Campbell—up next, stands under a glass basketball backboard. Watercolors of George Washington Carver and Frederick Douglass glare from display cases. All the administrators are black, as are the ten members of the muscular security force and the two full-time, uniformed cops, one of whom momentarily leaves his hallway beat to duck in and hear the mayor.

Along the top rows of both sets of bleachers, leaning against the white-painted cinder blocks, are male "crews" from nearby housing projects and neighborhoods in expensive Fila or Hilfiger or Nautica garments and \$100-plus shoes, mostly Nikes. Down a few rows from the crews on both sides of the gym is a ridge of wanna-bes, both boys and girls, who feel a rush of excitement sitting so close to their grander neighbors. All during the assembly, they crane their necks to glimpse the crews, to gauge proximity. Next in the hierarchy are the athletes. Local heroes at most high schools but paler characters at Ballou, they are clustered here and there, often identifiable by extreme height or girth. They are relatively few in number, since the school district's mandatory 2.0 grade point average for athletic participation is too high a bar for many kids here to cross.

The silent majority at Ballou—spreading along the middle and lower seats of the bleachers—are duck-and-run adolescents: baggy-panted boys and delicately coifed girls in the best outfits they can manage on a shoestring budget. They mug and smile shyly, play cards in class, tend to avoid eye contact, and whisper gossip about all the most interesting stuff going on at school. Hot topics of late include a boy shot recently during lunch period, another hacked with an ax, the girl gang member wounded in a knife fight with a female rival, the weekly fires set in lockers and bathrooms, and that unidentified body dumped a few weeks ago behind the parking lot. Their daily lesson: distinctiveness can be dangerous, so it's best to develop an aptitude for not being

noticed. This, more than any other, is the catechism taught at Ballou and countless other high schools like it across the country.

As with any dogma, however, there are bound to be heretics. At Ballou, their names are found on a bulletin board outside the principal's office. The list is pinned up like the manifest from a plane crash, the names of survivors. It's the honor roll, a mere 79 students—67 girls, 12 boys—out of 1,389 enrolled here who have managed a B average or better.

With the school's dropout/transfer rate at nearly 50 percent, it's understandable that kids at Ballou act as though they're just passing through. Academics are a low priority, so few stop to read the names of the honor students as they jostle by the bulletin board. Such inattentiveness drives frustrated teachers to keep making the board's heading bolder and more commanding. Giant, blocky blue letters now shout "WALL OF HONOR."

The wall is a paltry play by administrators to boost the top students' self-esteem—a tired mantra here and at urban schools everywhere. The more practical effect is that the kids listed here become possible targets of violence, which is why some students slated for the Wall of Honor speed off to the principal's office to plead that their names not be listed, that they not be singled out. To replace their fear with confidence, Principal Washington has settled on a new tactic: bribery. Give straight-A students cash and maybe they'll get respect, too. Any student with perfect grades in any of the year's four marking periods receives a \$100 check. For a year-long straight-A performance, that's \$400. Real money. The catch? Winners have to personally receive their checks at awards assemblies.

At the start, the assemblies were a success. The gymnasium was full, and honor students seemed happy to attend, flushed out by the cash. But after a few such gatherings, the jeering started. It was thunderous. "Nerd!" "Geek!" "Egghead!" And the harshest, "Whitey!" Crew members, sensing a hearts-and-minds struggle, stomped on the bleachers and howled. No longer simply names on the Wall of Honor, the "whiteys" now had faces. The honor students were hazed for months afterward. With each assembly, fewer show up.

Today's gathering of the mayor, the singer, and the guest DJs car-

ries an added twist: surprise. There was no mention of academic awards, just news about the mayor's visit, the music, and the general topic of "Stay in School."

As the R&B singer takes his bows, Washington steps forward, his trap in place. "I'll be reading names of students who got straight A's in the second marking period. I'd like each one to come forward to collect his \$100 prize and a special shirt from WPGC. We're all," he pauses, glaring across the crowd, "very, *very* proud of them." A murmur rumbles through the bleachers.

Washington takes a list from his breast pocket and begins reading names. He calls four sophomore girls who quietly slip, one by one, onto the gym floor. Then he calls a sophomore boy. Trying his best to vanish, the boy sits stone still in the bleachers, until a teacher spots him, yells, "You can't hide from me!" and drags him front and center. A chorus of "NEEERD!" rains down from every corner of the room.

Time for the juniors. Washington looks at his list, knowing this next name will bring an eruption. "Okay then," he says, mustering his composure. "The next award winner is . . . Cedric Jennings."

Snickers race through the crowd like an electrical current. Necks are craning, everyone trying to get the first glimpse.

"Oh Cedric? Heeere Cedric," a crew member calls out from the top row as his buddies dissolve in hysterics.

Washington starts to sweat. The strategy is backfiring. He scans the crowd. No sign. There's no way the boy could have known about the surprise awards; most teachers didn't even know. And Jennings, of all people. Jennings is the only male honor student who bears the cross with pride, the one who stands up to the blows. The only goddamn one left!

The principal clutches the mike stand, veins bulging from a too-tight collar, and gives it all he's got, "Cedric Jenningssss . . ."

Across a labyrinth of empty corridors, an angular, almond-eyed boy is holed up in a deserted chemistry classroom. Cedric Jennings often retreats here. It's his private sanctuary, the one place at Ballou where he feels completely safe, where he can get some peace.

He looks out the window at a gentle hill of overgrown grass, now patched with snow, and lets his mind wander down two floors and due south to the gymnasium, where he imagines his name being called. Not attending was a calculated bet. He'd heard rumors of possible academic awards. Catcalls from the assemblies of last spring and fall still burn in his memory.

Off in the distance are skeletons of trees and, behind them, a low-slung, low-rent apartment complex. His eyes glaze as he takes in the lifeless scene, clenching his jaw—a little habit that seems to center him—before turning back to the computer screen.

"Scholastic Aptitude Practice Test, English, Part III" floats at eye level, atop a long column of words—"cacophony," "metaphor," "alliteration"—and choices of definitions.

He presses through the list—words from another country, words for which you'd get punched if you used them here—and wonders, scrolling with the cursor, if these are words that white people in the suburbs use. A few screens down, a familiar-sounding noun appears: "epistle." Sort of like "apostle," he figures, passing by choice "A) a letter" and clicking his mouse on "B) a person sent on a mission."

He looks quizzically at his selection. Probably wrong, but he likes the sound of that phrase—"a person sent on a mission." Sort of like me, he thinks, on a mission to get out of here, to be the one who makes it.

Cedric Jennings is not, by nature, a loner, but he finds himself ever more isolated, walking a gauntlet through the halls, sitting unaccompanied in class, and spending hours in this room. He is comforted by its orderliness, by the beach-blanket-sized periodic table above his head against the back wall and the gentle glow of the bluish screen.

He scrolls back to the top of the vocabulary list and reaches for a dictionary on the computer table. The classroom's occupant, chemistry teacher Clarence Taylor, wanders into the room and registers surprise. "Didn't go down there, today, huh?" asks Taylor, a bearlike man in his early forties, short but wide all over. "I'm disappointed in you."

Cedric doesn't look up. "They give out the awards?" he asks nonchalantly.

"Yep," says Mr. Taylor.

"Glad I didn't go, then. I just couldn't take that abuse again," he says evenly, this time glancing over at the teacher. "I'll just pick up the check later. They have to give it to me, you know?"

Mr. Taylor offers a mock frown, now standing over the boy, eyes wide, brows arched. "That's not much of an attitude."

Cedric flips off the power switch with a long, dexterous finger. "I know," he murmurs. "I worked hard. Why should I be ashamed? Ashamed to claim credit for something I earned? I hate myself for not going."

He sits and stares at the darkened screen. He can hear Mr. Taylor ease away behind him and unload an armful of books on the slate-topped lab table near the blackboard. He knows the teacher is just fussing, walking through a few meaningless maneuvers while he tries to conjure a worthwhile response to what Cedric just said.

Mr. Taylor's moves are familiar by now. The teacher has personally invested in Cedric's future since the student appeared in his tenth grade chemistry class—back then, Cedric was a sullen ninth grader who had just been thrown out of biology for talking back to the teacher and needed somewhere to go. Taylor let him sit in, gave him a few assignments that the older kids were doing, and was soon marveling at flawless A papers. Taylor took Cedric for an after-school dinner at Western Sizzlin', and they were suddenly a team.

In the last two years, Taylor has offered his charge a steady stream of extra-credit projects and trips, like a visit last month with scientists at the National Aeronautics and Space Administration. He challenges Cedric with elaborate intellectual riddles, withholding praise and daring the pupil to vanquish his theatrical doubting with a real display of intellectual muscle. It's call and response, combative but productive. Mr. Taylor even sets up competitions among the top students, like a recent after-school contest to see who could most swiftly write every element in the periodic table from memory. As usual, Cedric rose to crush the competition, reeling off all 109 elements in three minutes, thirty-nine seconds.

Cedric is still staring at the dead screen when he finally hears Mr. Taylor's squeaky wing tips coming back around the lab table.

"You see, Cedric, you're in a race, a long race," the teacher says as

Cedric swivels toward him, his arms crossed. "You can't worry about what people say from the sidelines. They're already out of it. You, however, are still on the track. You have to just keep on running so . . ."

"All right, I know," says Cedric, smirking impatiently. With Mr. Taylor, it's either a marathon metaphor or a citation from Scripture, and Cedric has heard the race routine many times before. "I'm doing my best, Mr. Taylor. I do more than ten people sometimes."

Mr. Taylor clams up. So much for *that race metaphor*, Cedric thinks to himself, delighted to employ an SAT word. He jumps up from the chair and paces around the classroom, picking up things and putting them down, looking caged.

"So, did you mail the application yet?" Taylor asks, trying to keep the conversation alive.

"Yeeeeeess, I maaaaiiled it," Cedric says, rolling his eyes.

This is not just any application. It's a bid for acceptance into a special summer program for top minority high school students at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. It's highly competitive, drawing from a nationwide pool and taking kids for an intensive six-week program between their junior and senior years. It offers academic enrichment but also sizes up whether the students could cut it at MIT. About 60 percent are eventually offered a blessed spot in the university's freshman class for the following year.

Cedric does not dare speak about it to anyone except Mr. Taylor, who helped him with the application. He feels too vulnerable. His yearning is white hot. It's his first real competition against invisible opponents—minority kids from far better schools—in what Cedric rightly knows is a dry run for the college applications that must be mailed in the coming school year. It could even mean a slot, eventually, at MIT.

It will be nearly two months before he hears whether he's accepted, but the program is quickly consuming Cedric's thoughts. His notebooks in math, physics, and English have MIT doodles—the three magic letters are Gothic here, three-dimensional there, then crossing over one page and written fifty times on the next. Being accepted there would be the reward for years of sacrifice.

"You think I'll get in?" he asks, awkward and momentarily exposed, but catches himself. "I mean, you know, whaaaatever. What does it matter?"

"Will you get in?" begins Mr. Taylor, launching another discursive riff. "Well, let me note . . ." The class bell rings, interrupting him, and Cedric prepares to go, having lost his taste for an answer.

The hallways fill as a wave of students from the gymnasium washes through the school. Leaving the chemistry classroom, Cedric keeps his eyes fixed forward on a shifting spot of linoleum about a yard ahead of his front foot. He hears someone from behind, a boy's voice, yell, "Where was you Cedric—hiding in the bathroom?" followed by a burst of nearby giggles, but he won't look up. Just don't get into it, he says over and over in his head, trying to drown out the noise.

Today, though, it's no use. He wheels around to see a contingent behind him, two hard-looking boys he barely knows and an accompaniment of girls.

"Why don't you just shut up," he barks, facing them while backpedaling. "Just leave me alone." Fortunately, his math class is the next doorway and he slips into the almost empty classroom, relieved to have avoided an altercation.

"Ready for the test today, Cedric?" asks Joanne Nelson from her desk across the room. She's a round, soft-spoken, dark-skinned black woman who also had Cedric in tenth grade.

"Uh-huh," he nods, regaining some composure. "Yeah, I mean, I think I'm in real good shape."

The test is in Unified Math, his favorite subject. Each day, Cedric looks forward to this class, composed of eighteen kids from Ballou's special math and science program.

With the program, Ballou is attempting a sort of academic triage that is in vogue at tough urban schools across the country. The idea: save as many kids as you can by separating out top students early and putting the lion's share of resources into boosting as many of them as possible to college. Forget about the rest. The few kids who can manage to learn, to the right; the overwhelming majority who are going nowhere, flow left.

Cedric, like some other math/science students, applied to the program and arrived a year early to Ballou, which allows a handful of ninth graders to enroll with the eight-hundred-student tenth grade class. While at Ballou, the math/science students mix with the general student body for subjects like English and history but stay separated for math and science classes, which are called "advanced" but are more at a middle level of classes taught at most of the area's suburban high schools.

Slipping into a favorite desk, Cedric watches as the rest of the class arrives, mostly girls, many of them part of a tiny middle-class enclave from nearby Bolling Air Force base. He is friendly with a few of the girls, but today the room is tense and hushed, so he just nods a quick hello or two. Soon, everyone is lost in the sheaves of test papers.

It takes only a few moments for a calm to come over him. Knowing the material cold is Cedric's best antidote to the uncertainty that sometimes wells up inside him, the doubts about whether any amount of work will be enough to propel him to a new life. He takes out his ruler and confidently draws two vertical lines, noting points for asymptotes, limits, and intercepts. He moves easily through the algebraic functions on the next few questions, hunched close to his paper, writing quickly and neatly, the pencil's eraser end wiggling near his ear. For half an hour, he is steady and deliberate, like someone savoring a fine meal.

When he arrives at the last question—which asks students to write about the topic they have found most interesting thus far in the semester—he starts tapping his pencil on the desk. So much to choose from.

Finally, he begins to write: "The part that most interested me was finding the identity of the trigonometric functions. I had a little bit of trouble with them at first, but they became easy!" He reels off ten lines of tangent, sine, and cosine functions, an intricate equation springing effortlessly from his memory, and arrives at a proof. Cedric sits back to admire his work. It's so neat and final, so orderly. So much confusion, all around, such a long way to travel to get out of this hole, but here, at least, he can arrive at modest answers—small steps—that give him the sensation of motion.

He's done and puts down his pencil. Still ten minutes to the period

bell. Suddenly, he smiles for the first time in days and again grabs the dull No. 2. Across the bottom, he scribbles "I LOVE THIS STUFF!"

Each afternoon, there is a choice of bus stops. The stop right in front of the school is usually quiet and empty late in the afternoon, while another one, a few hundred yards away on bustling Martin Luther King Avenue, is always hopping.

At 5:02 P.M. on this day, a week after the awards assembly, Cedric Jennings emerges from Ballou's side entrance, having already finished his homework and another SAT practice test in Clarence Taylor's room. He slings his bookbag over his shoulder, freeing his hands to pull closed his three-year-old black parka with the broken zipper. Day by day, he's hearing fewer barbs in the hallways about the awards assembly, and his spirits lift a bit as he sees a fading late afternoon sun shining across the teachers' parking lot. He pauses to look at it a moment—there hasn't been much sun lately—and decides today to opt for Martin Luther King.

In a moment, he's strolling on the boulevard—Southeast's main street of commerce, legal and otherwise—and taking in the sights. There's a furious bustle at this time of day. Darkness, after all, comes earlier here than in those parts of Washington where the streetlights work, where national chains have stores with big neon marquees, and where everything stays open late. In those places, the churn of commerce isn't halted, as it is here, by a thoroughly rational fear that seems to freeze the streets at nightfall.

Cedric huddles against the cloudy plastic window of the bus stop hut and watches the drug dealers near the intersection at 8th Street. He wonders what draws him out to the avenue bus stop, where—God knows—he could get killed. People do, all the time; he muses today, as he often does when he stands at this stop, about whether coming out here means he's going a little crazy.

Two crack dealers are chatting about twenty feet away. Both guys are in their early twenties, with hair mottled from being outside all day—one in a fine-looking long-sleeve Redskins football jersey and the

other in a soft leather jacket. Cedric cranes his head around the hut's aluminum edge to pick up the conversation. He's sure they're armed and he spots telltale bulges on each with his trained eye.

"So, you see, this bitch, she sucked my dick just to get her a little rock," says the Redskins jersey.

"Hey, next time you send her to me," says the soft leather, throwing his head back in a toothless laugh. "I'll give her what she needs real bad."

Cedric listens, not breathing, and then pulls back behind the plastic wall just as the one in leather turns toward him.

Hidden behind the bus shelter, he replays the dialogue in his head where he will continue to chew on it for days afterward. He smells the rich greasy aroma of Popeye's Fried Chicken wafting from across the street, hears a saxophonist just up the boulevard, playing for quarters. A few guys he recognizes from Ballou, including some crew members, wander into view and he watches them flirt—or "kick some game"—with two cute girls who are rolling their eyes but definitely not walking away.

Spending so much time alone, he finds it hard to resist observing the fiery action all around. No diving in, not for him, not ever, but what's the harm in watching a little, picking up bits of this or that? He spots the bus a few blocks down. Clenching his molars to flex muscle at the bend of his still smooth, boyish jaw, he steps out into the wind.

Apartment 307 on the third floor of the blond brick High View Apartments at 1635 V Street, Southeast, is empty, dark, and warm at 6:04 P.M., when Cedric unlocks the door. There hasn't always been heat, with overdue bills and whatnot, and he always appreciates the warmth, especially after the long walk from the Anacostia bus and subway station in the icy dusk wind.

He slips out of his coat and backpack and goes from room to room turning on lights, something he's done since he was a small kid, coming home alone to apartments and tiptoeing, with a lump in his throat, to check if intruders were lurking inside closets and under beds.

It's not a very big place—two bedrooms, a small bathroom, a kitchen—

shakes her head dismissively. "What did I tell you? Before you know it, you'll be leaving them all behind. Just pay them no mind."

"Okay, okay," he says, "but what if I get rejected by MIT? That'd kill me." Barbara heeds this more carefully. It was she, after all, who found a description of the program in a scholarship book that someone gave to her at the office.

"You can't be worrying about MIT, Lavar. Just pray about it. If God has meant it to happen, it will." She looks up between bites and sees he's not convinced. "Look, your grades are perfect, your recommendations are good. What can they not like?"

"Yeah, I guess," he concedes.

"What's the point of getting down on yourself?" she says. "People will see that you're special."

He nods, letting her words sink in, and they eat for a while in silence—just the two of them, the way it has been for years. Barbara's two older girls, Cedric's half-sisters, are twenty-six and thirty-one and long gone, leaving mother and son to rely on each other in more ways than they can count.

Through years of ups and downs—times when he was certain that he was unworthy of success or love or any reasonable hope of getting something better—her faith in him has been his savior. It always amazes him. Having finished dinner quickly, he watches her clean her plate contentedly, and he shakes his head. She's just rock solid certain that he's going to MIT. Who knows, he wonders as he busses their plates and begins washing the dishes. Maybe she's right.

Both return to their customary evening routines—Barbara back to the couch and her sitcoms while Cedric dries and puts away the dishes and silverware. Quieter now, with the sink water not running, he hears what sounds like pops from outside, almost certainly gunshots. He looks over at his mother sitting by the window but she doesn't react, so he begins wiping down the kitchen counters.

Gunshots are part of the background score here. Listen on most nights and a few pops are audible. The corner nearest the house—16th and V—is among the worst half-dozen or so spots in the city for crack cocaine dealing. The corner a block north—16th and U—is, of late,

the very worst. There has been lots of shooting on both corners recently, but still they're open all night, and the traffic of buyers on 16th remains strong and steady in all weather.

Cedric knows that the surrounding mayhem is not something he and his mother need to talk much about. Still, it's always there, ionizing the air in the apartment, lending it some extra gravity, which, Cedric told his mother a couple of weeks ago, gives him "a little something to push against."

Cedric hangs up the wet dish towel on a drawer handle and strides toward the short hallway leading to his room. He glances quickly at Barbara as he passes and realizes that the TV is on but she's no longer watching it. Her eyes are on him.

He stops. "What you looking at?"

She pauses as though she's trying to remember something. "What did I once tell you?" she asks finally, in a tentative voice.

"Ma, what are you talking about, talking crazy?"

"What did I once tell you, Lavar?"

"I don't know. You tell me lots of things."

She stands, tying her robe closed, and slowly points a finger at him, buying an extra moment to get the words from Scripture just so: "The race," she says with a satisfied smile, "goes not to the swift nor the strong, but he who endureth until the end."

Oh yes, that's a good one, Cedric agrees, and nods. Hasn't heard that one in a while. "Thank you, Jesus," he says to her with a wry smile as he makes his way toward the back bedroom. Stopping at the threshold, he turns and calls back: "But it wouldn't be so terrible to be all swift and strong—just once in a while—and let some other people do all the enduring."

Barbara, sunk back into the couch, can't help but laugh.

ATTENTION, STUDENTS. WE ARE IN CODE BLUE."

Cedric Jennings gazes at the silvery mesh intercom speaker above the blackboard in Advanced Physics. Images of tumult form in his head.



"Listen, Cedric, if you looking for something hot and wet, I'll give it to you."

Guffaws all around.

"Yeah, and I'll give you something hard and dry right back," he counters as the class erupts in catcalls. Cedric is removed from the room. "I put in a lot of hours, a lot of time, to get everything just right," he says to Mr. Momen from a forest of beakers and microscopes in the adjoining lab area. "I shouldn't just give answers away."

"Cedric," Mr. Momen says as he turns back to the others, "you have to figure out a way to get along better with people. Other students try hard, too. They're not all trying to get you."

Cedric sits for a moment, alone again, and quietly pushes through the worksheet, calculating, at the very least, what's being asked of him in physics. He leads the class—including his rival, LaCountiss—in grade points for the semester.

After class, he makes his way across the width of the building toward the cafeteria, thinking about what Mr. Momen said and what it's supposed to mean. How can he possibly get along with kids who hate him, he asks himself as he walks, lifting his gaze from the floor and searching the faces of kids flowing in the opposite direction in the hallway. Hate? Well, maybe not hate exactly, he decides. It's more that they hate what he represents, or something.

As he watches them pass, Cedric struggles with something that he would rather not know and that he manages, day in and day out, to keep safely submerged: that these kids are not all that different from him, that what mostly differentiates him are transferable qualities like will and faith. Just like him, they are almost all low-income black kids from a shadowy corner of America. His exile is, in large measure, self-induced and enforced. If he changed, soon enough he'd be accepted.

He knows all this but pushes the thoughts out of his head. Reaching out to any fellow ghetto kids is an act he puts in the same category as doing drugs: the initial rush of warmth and euphoria puts you on a path to ruin. His face, uncharacteristically open and searching a moment ago, slips into its customary pursed-lipped armor. Don't give up, don't give in. Other kids, passing him in the hall, pick it up. No one's a fool here. They recognize Cedric's face—pinched, dismissive, looking

right past them. They've seen this look before, on the faces of white people, and they respond accordingly.

"Can you believe that sorry ass Cedric," whispers a pudgy boy, leaning against a locker as Cedric passes.

A boy on his left—a tall drink of water in a Nike shirt—nods. "Right, just look at him, would you? Kind of pants are those?"

"He needs a good beating," murmurs a third, just loud enough for Cedric to hear.

Cedric cuts forward like a torpedo. Around the next bend comes Phillip Atkins, a tough, popular fellow junior sporting a C- average who is, lately, in Cedric's face.

"Oh, look, it's the amazing nerdboy," Phillip chides as he approaches. Cedric tries to slip by, but there's a crowd up ahead watching a craps game in the hall, causing a backup. There's nowhere to go.

"Come on nerdboy, you and me, let's do it, right now," says Phillip, feigning a punch as a girl holds him back and two boys, standing nearby, giggle. Phillip is known for his sense of humor.

"Why don't you leave me be, Phillip?" says Cedric after a moment. "What'd I ever do to you?"

Phillip, satisfied at getting a rise, just smiles. The two stand for a minute, eye to eye: Cedric in a white shirt, khakis, and black felt shoes, math book in one hand, the other hand clenched in a fist, shaking nervously; Phillip, a bit shorter and wiry, dressed in a brown T-shirt with jeans pulled low. The latter offers a menacing deadeye stare, copied immaculately from the gang leaders he admires, and Cedric breaks it off, looking away, flustered.

The craps game is over, and his exit has cleared. Throwing a side-long scowl at Phillip, Cedric slips forward through the dispersing mob, in the midst of which Delante Coleman collects his dice and rises from a crouch. Delante, known to all as "Head" because he helps run one of the school's largest gangs, the Trenton Park Crew, is short and stocky, with caramel-light skin, hazel eyes, and the temerity of a killer. He helps manage a significant drug dealing and protection ring, directs a dozen or so underlings, drives a Lexus, and, in his way, is every bit as driven as Cedric. It's what each does with his fury and talents that separates these two into a sort of urban black yin and yang.

Cedric passes tight against the lockers, and Head, flirting with some girls, doesn't see him—which is just as well. Head and some of his crew enjoy toying with honor students, or “goodies,” as he calls them, messing with their hair, taking their books (if they're foolish enough to carry any), scuffling them up a bit.

By now, Cedric has cut hard to the left into a different hallway, one that leads toward the cafeteria, which is a few feet ahead. He often tries to eat in empty classrooms—the cafeteria being the type of free-fire zone that someone of his lowly social status is wise to avoid—but today a friend of his, a girl, convinced him to meet her at the cafeteria. Just inside the side entrance, she is waiting for him.

“Bout time you got here, Cedric. I'm starving,” says LaTisha Williams, arms folded but smiling radiantly. “It's wrong to keep your boo waiting.”

Cedric says nothing, just smirks at her and rolls his eyes. LaTisha is not his “boo,” slang for girl- or boyfriend. She's bubbly and has a pretty face, but she's huge—five-foot-two and maybe 250 pounds. She's an outcast, just like he is. But, he concedes, handing her a pinkish tray, she usually manages to cheer him up.

Mostly, she talks and he laughs, offering modest rejoinders, and now off she goes again. Today she's doing a riff—mostly for the benefit of another girl with them in line—about Cedric's long-ago flirtation with Connie Mitchell, a gorgeous, light-skinned ingénue from the Bolling Air Force base area, who arrived here midway through tenth grade.

“You see, Cedric goes up to her and says, ‘Hi. Hi, you new here? Can I do anything for you. Can I, can I?’” says LaTisha. “He was on her like a dog, sniffing her up and down.” Cedric chuckles at this, appreciating any story showing that, sexually speaking, his clock ticks in the traditional fashion. He's made passes at other girls, though it never amounts to much, and he's begun to see himself through other people's eyes, wondering if he's just not manly enough to have any success with women. Though his voice has yet to change, he has no feminine affectations. He's pleasant looking and tallish, his dress unflamboyant but neat and usually color coordinated. He suspects that it is this terrain that's atypical and upside down—but he's not sure. All he knows is

that, here, no one wants to be with an honor student—a pariah—except maybe LaTisha, who has few alternatives. Cedric Jennings simply has no social currency at Ballou.

“Cedric, you just ain't a woman's man,” LaTisha says a few minutes later, once they're seated, certain she'll get a rise out of him. But Cedric, increasingly glum about the subject and anxious to leave the cafeteria, bears down on his grilled cheese and doesn't get into it. LaTisha quietly eats her undressed salad and leaves to get a second one.

Looking across the raucous cafeteria crowd, Cedric is reminded of the assembly—probably most of these kids were there—and what he said that day to Mr. Taylor, about how not going made him feel ashamed.

*Ashamed.* The word has been smoldering inside him for weeks. What he said, it didn't track somehow. Was he ashamed of getting all A's? No, he was proud of that. So why wouldn't he show his face? Is it maybe that he's ashamed of being alone all the time, of being so lame? No girlfriend. No close-guy friends. He tears at an empty carton of milk with his long, agile fingers. No, that doesn't seem right either. That's all part of his solitary mission to get out of here and off to a famous college.

LaTisha comes back. “You okay, Cedric? You look kind of bad.”

“Yeah,” he says. “I'm all right. Just been thinking about why I feel the way I do.”

With the afternoon temperature reaching seventy, students start slipping out early from one of Ballou's ten exits. Cedric sits through his afternoon classes and finds himself absently watching the clock. After the dismissal bell, he runs into LaTisha in the hallway and tells her he's not going to stay his usual two hours or so after school. He thinks he'll just “go home, watch TV, and crash.”

She says she's going home, too, and they walk outside to the bus stop just in front of the school. In the very late afternoons, when Cedric often leaves the building, this stop is empty. At 3:30, though, it's jammed and rowdy with kids who've been cooped up for the winter in nearby public housing projects, small apartments, or modest homes, all now feeling the free sunshine on their faces.

He and LaTisha take different buses home, so she's talking fast to fill the few moments they'll have before parting. He's nodding and half listening. Then something happens.

A boy a few feet away from them grabs another boy around the neck, pulls out a pistol, and holds it to the other kid's head. People are screaming and trying to get away, bumping into each other, not sure which direction to run. Cedric, backing onto the grass, turns to see the gun again and feels himself flinching. He sees that LaTisha has fallen down, her great girth slumped onto the concrete.

And then it's over. The kid with the gun runs across the street and disappears. No shots were fired, and some kids murmur about whether the gun, which was an odd greenish color, was real.

Cedric's bus comes and, after helping LaTisha up, he gets on, shaken, and finds a seat. He pushes himself tight into the seat's corner, leaning his shoulder against the bumpy tin siding as the bus rolls up to the avenue stop. The dealers are out in force today, and, looking at them, he realizes that he's been fooling himself, that there is no safe distance, no safe place to go, not in school, not on the street, not anywhere.

His breath feels short. He closes his eyes, presses his fingers against them, and feels that his hands are trembling. In the dark field behind his closed lids, he sees clearly the gun, the terrified face of the kid with the barrel pressed against his temple, and LaTisha falling. He jerks his eyes open, tries to push the images away, and finds himself recalling something that happened in school a year ago. It was just a day or two after last spring's awards ceremony. A kid came up to him in the hall, a smallish kid in a green army jacket. The kid said something about not liking Cedric's face and how he saw him get his \$100 award check and it made him sick—and there was a bulge in the army jacket's pocket. The heavy green fabric was tented into a triangle pointing out from the kid's hip. Cedric looked down and could see the back of a rat-gray steel handle.

Cedric can't remember much else—just that he couldn't speak, that he ran through a cluster of kids into the bathroom, terrified, and decided not to tell Mr. Washington or anyone about it, afraid that there'd be retaliation if he squealed. He never saw the kid again.

He hasn't thought about any of that for almost a year. He just pushed it out of his mind. But now, as the bus rumbles through the gritty circus on Martin Luther King Avenue, it suddenly dawns on him. Maybe that's why he didn't go to the awards assembly. It wasn't that he was ashamed of his achievements or too weak to face the razzing. He was scared. Maybe that kid's still out there. That's why he hid. He's scared right now. Nothing wrong with that.

He lets out a little high-pitched laugh, drawing an anxious stare from an old woman sitting next to him. He smiles at her and she looks away. Yes sir, he muses, feeling a weight lift. His absence didn't mean they'd won and he'd lost. He was simply scared to death. That's something he can live with.